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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COTONOU 000337

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SUBJECT: BENIN WRAP-UP MAY 31 - JUNE 13, 2008

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REF:

1.(U) This cable is a bi-weekly summary of events which occurred in Benin between May 31 and June 13. Comments for improvements from readers are welcome. Please direct them to Pol/Econ Officer Jason Hahn at hahnje@state.gov.

2.(U) Contents:

- CEN-SAD Summit in Cotonou June 12 - 18
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- Embassy Finds Increase in Fraudulent Visa Applications
- GOB agrees to host Peace Corps anniversary celebration
- Peacekeepers complete ACOTA training for DRC Deployment

CEN-SAD Summit in Cotonou June 12-18

13. The Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD) Summit began in Cotonou on June 12 with experts meetings. The summit's theme is "Rural Development and Food Security". Presidents and Prime Ministers will arrive for the high level meetings on June 16 and depart on June 18. Approximately half of CEN-SAD's 25 heads of state have confirmed their attendance at the summit.

Protests Mar Inaugurations of New Municipal Councils

14. Following the April 20 and May 1 local and municipal elections, prefects (high-ranking civil servants who represent the State at the departmental level) installed 53 out of 77 municipal councils. Protests, some turning violent, prevented the prefects from installing the councils in the remaining 24 communes and cities. The protesters dispute the final election results released by the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENA) which differ in some cities from the results recorded by political parties when the ballots were counted immediately after the election. The protestors demand that the Supreme Court rule on pending election appeals before the prefects install the new councilors and mayors. In response, the government asked political parties to calm their partisans and put an inter-ministerial committee in place to defuse the crisis. In Cotonou, where the city council was installed uneventfully, 48 of 49 councilors voted to renew former president and Renaissance of Benin party leader Nicephore Soglo's mandate as

Cotonou's mayor.

West African Gas Pipeline Construction in Benin Stalls

15. Construction of Benin's on-shore natural gas pipeline which links the sub-marine West African Gas Pipeline (WAGP) to the on-shore metering station has been at a standstill since January 2008. According to Maxime Semassoussi at the Ministry of Mines, Energy, and Water, Willbros, the contractor performing the work, abandoned the project after the West Africa Gas Pipeline Company, WAGPCo, did not agree to an increase in the initially agreed upon price for completion of the contract. As a result WAGPCo terminated its contract with Willbros in February 2008. According to Semassoussi, WAGPCo issued a new invitation for tenders to select a new contractor to complete the construction. Willbros submitted a bid in the new tender. WAGPCo expects construction work to resume in July 2008 and finish in the first quarter of 2009.

PAO Hosts Conferences on U.S. Political System

16. The Public Affairs Section hosted a week-long series of conferences with Dr. Sheldon Gellar, a Political Scientist, Research Associate and Independent International Development Consultant from Indiana University, who engaged Beninese audiences in discussions on the U.S. political system. The conferences stimulated dialogue comparing the Beninese political practices and received wide-spread media coverage. The program consisted of a series of lectures and discussions that were held at the American Cultural Center, at the National Teacher's Training School in Porto-Novo, and at the Universities of Abomey-Calvi and Parakou. Dr. Gellar spoke on the

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U.S. election process, electoral issues, U.S constitutional provisions regarding the separation of powers, U.S aspects of grassroots democracy; citizens' role, responsibility and involvement in the political process; the role, place and utility of the civil society, the role of religious leaders in democracy, women in politics; corruption, good governance; and shifting trends in the financing of political parties and campaigns.

USAID Launches Girls Education Project

17. The USAID funded Girl's Education and Community Participation Project was officially launched in Parakou on June 12, 2008. Activities under this USD 5 million 4-year grant to World Education will assist the Government of Benin to improve quality, increase access and expand community participation in the education sector. Activities will build on the successes of previous USG supported projects and contribute to the following results: increased access to and improved performance of girls in school in targeted areas; improved community contribution to transparent management of the education system; and improved response to HIV/AIDS in the basic education sector.

Moving Rocks May Pose Problem for MCC's Program at Port

18. Millennium Challenge Account-Benin (MCA-Benin) held its first validation workshop for the environmental studies related to construction at Cotonou's port. Participants responded vigorously when told that forty trucks a day for 18 months will be required to bring rock to the port for the new wharf. This heavy traffic will need to come over the quickly deteriorating road between Bohicon and Abomey-Calvi and then through the city of Cotonou. In addition, transport of many times this much rock is anticipated for a large scale project to combat coastal erosion (not funded by MCA-Benin) which is planned for construction at the same time. MCA-Benin is asking its consultant to provide a detailed analysis of the cumulative impact of the Compact port construction activities and,

despite its current decrepit condition, to evaluate the feasibility of partial use of the rail line which connects Cotonou with northern Benin. MCA-Benin is offering detailed briefings to potential bidders on the port construction project in Paris the week of June 123.

Embassy Finds Increase in Fraudulent Visa Applications

¶9. The consular section has seen a trend in fraudulent NIV applications in the last month. The section discovered seven dubious cases in which a couple applied for tourist visas to vacation in the United States. Generally, the husband was allegedly the owner of a fair-sized business and would normally already have traveled to the Schengen countries, while the wife would have no travel out of the region. Three impostors who had previously applied under different names at nearby posts were discovered by biometric systems. One additional couple was discovered by the RSO when they were acting suspiciously while in line and when confronted, fled the scene. Three additional couples were discovered when they presented fake bank statements from an imaginary microcredit organization, PAFME. Conoff suspects other couples applying are attempts at this fraud, but without additional evidence, they have been refused under section 214(b).

GOB agrees to host Peace Corps anniversary celebration

¶10. On June 6, the GOB informed Peace Corps Benin that in celebration of Peace Corps Benin's 40th anniversary later this year, the GOB will finance a television documentary on Peace Corps presence in Benin for nationwide distribution and allow Peace Corps Benin free use of the Palais de Congres conference center to hold the anniversary events. Peace Corps has been operational in Benin since 1968, and will celebrate its 40th anniversary on September 5, 2008.

Peacekeepers complete ACOTA training for DRC Deployment

¶11. On Friday, June 6, 2008, 700 Beninese soldiers deploying in

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support of the U.N. peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) completed their training. Northrop Grumman contractors and U.S. Marine Corps elements provided the training and acted as mentors. At the end of the training, U.S. instructors expressed the need for the ACOTA program to continue with a substantial American presence, as the Beninese Armed Forces are not ready to assume full training responsibilities. Three containers of ACOTA provided military equipment arrived in the Port of Cotonou on June 11. The equipment includes Kevlar helmets and night vision equipment destined for Beninese peacekeeping forces.

BOUSTANI